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THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

23 MAY, 1980

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Mediocrity for the millions

By Geoffrey Hosking

ALEXANDER ZINOVIEV:

The Yawning Heights
Translated by Gordon Clough.
88pp. Bodley Head, £9.95.

Stelios Iudushchee
(The Radiant Future)
211pp. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme.

Zapiski ochnoogo storozha
(Notes of a Night Watchman)
113pp. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme.

Vpredverii roya
(Antarctic to Paradise)
58pp. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme.

Alexander Zinoviev must be one of the world's fastest writers. It is less than four years since his first novel, outside his professional specialty, was published, and there was a giant novel, *The Yawning Heights*, running to more than eight hundred pages in the English translation. Since then, he has published three more novels (one of them of comparable length), given interviews and written articles to fill a book, and announced the publication of a further four-part novel, of which, indeed, the first volume has just appeared.

Not, of course, that all the work of creation has been confined to those four years. In fact, these books represent the outpouring of a lifetime's accumulated experience, reflection and frustration. For twenty-two years Zinoviev was a member of the Institute of Philosophy of the Soviet Academy of Sciences; he was also a professor of logic and for a time head of the Department of Logic at Moscow University. He gained an international reputation in the field of mathematical logic, which earned him membership of the Finnish Academy of Sciences and numerous invitations to lecture abroad. But he was never able to accept any of these invitations because the Soviet authorities had a file on him dating back to 1939, when he was expelled from the USSR for "anti-Soviet propaganda".

Although he later "after" the death of Stalin joined the Communist Party, he did so, as he himself says, with the intention of continuing his fight against Stalinism legally. His candidate for the USSR Congress of Soviets was for this "anti-Soviet Union" is haunted by the absence of the "magnificent prospects" of which the ideologist Andrei Zhdanov spoke in his Congress of the Soviet Writers' Union in 1934. This is completely fragmented. Plot-lines are intertwined with each other in a confused and inconsequential way, and are frequently interrupted by conversations, songs and speculative digressions. The sense of place is vague: at times Ibsen appears to cover the whole world, at other times it is merely a muddy extended village where everybody knows everybody else. Language has lost its context; ordinary narrative lies side by side with theoretical discourse, doggerel verse and idle gossip. Human

beings have lost their individuality: they are all called Ibanov (an amalgam of the commonest Russian surname and the commonest Russian obscenity), and are otherwise designated by category names, like Thinker, Sociologist, Member, and so on.

The narrator is no longer confident or omniscient. Indeed, he is no longer a single person, but has divided himself into the figures of Chatterer, Bawler, Slammer, Neurotic, Schizophrenic, and probably others too. It is not even clear what the genre of *Yawning Heights* is: "novel" seems an inappropriate term for such a ragbag of miscellaneous items. At times it seems more like a theoretical treatise, since several of its characters have an irrefragable logic in all down and expounding in sociological, anthropological or philosophical terms about their (otherwise meaningless) experience. But as a whole the work does not have, and does not appear to win at, the coherence of a theoretical or scientific study. Perhaps in the end, the most best characterisation is as a four-million letter explication hurled in the face of the Soviet authorities.

It does, however, have very important things to say about Soviet society—things which, needless to say, are highly unwelcome to those authorities, but which, for all that, are extremely more welcome to many dissenters and émigrés. Zinoviev's central thesis is that the Soviet Union is a normal country. It is not the product of a diabolical impure ideology; on the contrary, its arrangements are those which nature would create for himself without the restraints imposed by centuries of civilized society. Indeed, Ibsen is in part a Hobbesian vision. The "war of all against all" is continuous, and man's life is "poor, needy and brutal". Though, as it happens, far from "poor", since Ibsen's social mobility is constant, and the perpetual struggle for the few good things of life generates factions.

Hobbes's Leviathan, moreover, has somehow contrived to get himself already firmly installed in the state of nature, without waiting for a social contract, and for from riding imperially above the battle restraining it, actually lays down the ground rules, organizes the contests, provides the weapons, and awards the prizes. Even without a social contract, however, this Leviathan rules with the approval of the great majority of its subjects, since it guarantees law, order, and a modicum of comfort, a tolerable standard of living and a set of comfortable illusions. "Marxism is the ideology of the most mediocre sector of society, an ideology created by and for them."

To give meaning to the otherwise senselessly daily round of jockeying for status and material goods, the ideology invents its own pseudo-events, an endless round of anniversaries and celebrations (the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution,

the hundredth anniversary of Lenin's birth, the thirty-fifth anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War, and so on). Leaders continually upward themselves ranks and medals. Real work is crowded out by imitation work, because the latter can take far longer and employ far more people. The facade becomes more important than the substance, the word than the deed. Take food shortages, for example. They stimulate social mobility: many of the "bureaucratic" interminable conversations take place in food queues—and (ii) are not real anyway, since the public media can either ignore them or disguise them in something terminology (the "temporary difficulties" which Vladimir Bukovsky has called "the most permanent feature in the life of Soviet man").

The result is an elaborately varnished alienation offering a model of existence well short of ideal, but still perfectly acceptable to most people in most circumstances. The only thing which can seriously threaten this way of life is military invasion from outside, for this puts incompetence and ineptness to serious test. Zinoviev devotes many pages, both in *Yawning Heights* and *Antarctic to Paradise*, to the sufferings ordinary soldiers undergo when their commanders try to conduct real campaigns on the basis of familiar humanistic "humanity". In normal circumstances, however, the essential qualification for leadership in Ibsen is mediocrity. Any real talent is a decided handicap, unless it be the talent for petty intrigue and the ruthless pursuit of narrow, selfish goals. The daily texture of social life is a struggle for food, clothes, living space, jobs, material goods, status on honour (most of which are in short supply owing to the officially sanctioned laziness and mediocrity).

One archetypal Ibsenian institution is the communal apartment, where people live in a collective rather than in a family. In fact, the other way round. Full-scale Ibsenism has existed for ages. . . . But there are no scientific studies of it at all. Zinoviev no longer criticizes. Marxist theoretically, because it is inevitable to such criticism: it is not a science, but an ideology. Its alliance with science is fortuitous, a tribute to our times, in which the phenomena of the universe happen to be interpreted in scientific categories rather than in those, say, scholastic theology. In fact, Marxism is more like a religion than a science, though it lacks the subjective, spiritual element which is essential to religion. On the other hand, it is a genuinely scientific study of communism as it has worked out in practice, in actually existing "socialist" societies (which Zinoviev holds have in fact already obtained fully developed communism), would reveal a great deal about the underlying nature of the main aims of Zinoviev's writings.

In arguing that it is pointless to attack Marxism, Zinoviev is in more or less open polemic with Solzhenitsyn, who appears as Trilby-teller in *Yawning Heights*. Attacks on Marxism, Zinoviev warns, tend to reintroduce in negative the structures of the ideology, and thus to reinforce it in people's minds. To suggest renouncing the ideology (as Solzhenitsyn did in his letter to the Soviet leaders of 1978) he sees as simply wishful thinking, given the key role it plays in the social structure. The Soviet leaders are themselves in the grip of their ideology: to make more than trivial modifications in it, let alone to abandon it, is quite beyond their power.

Yet Zinoviev is also in some ways immovably attracted by the forthrightness and integrity of Solzhenitsyn's stance, an admiration he has reiterated more than once in interviews with Western journalists. As Chatterer says: "Truth-teller is a great child, who has suffered unjustly, cruelly and senselessly. He is problem number one of our time. He is something much bigger than ideology, politics and morality. He is the point where all the problems are concentrated. If only men could contrive to preserve all this for ever!"

This "last" rather enigmatic remark takes us to a nodal point in Zinoviev's thinking. What, to means, I think, is that Solzhenitsyn has a moral conviction enough of the past in him to stand as a living testimony to the degradation of the present, and perhaps to point towards a new ideal for the future. This aspect of Zinoviev's thought

The View from Hakone

The world exploded: osh and aino both.
But it was hot: the world: only Japan.
And only part of that. It was a myth.
Under the myth, people once more began
To crawl through ashes, wreckage, poverty.
The fumes subsided. The volcano's breath
Exhaled on the horizon.

Stand here, see
This tiny spider chancing its puny death
On mud that bubbles half an inch below.
Coke-tins and plastic judder in the pool,
Boiling and rising.

Spring Festival, and so
The affluent crowds (young ones with Cool Man, Cool
On sweaters) stroll about, spill out from cars,
Enjoy the blossom, holiday, rich peace.
Try Sake Carnival. There are no wars.
Only the TV Space War stuff, The Police
Throb from transistors, transistorized Pax
Nipponica. The red sun is unfurled.

Across the western sea, a billion backs
Bend to the four trends, tug the turning world.

Anthony Thwaite

